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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH¹

BY F. M. COLBY

IN France, says Mr. W. C. Brownell, current criticism tends to become a province of literature instead of remaining, as with us, a "department of routine." The qualities of M. Faguet's essay on Flaubert are probably not very common in France, but there is certainly a better chance of finding them, even among the anonymous or the undistinguished, than in the corresponding quarters here. Mr. Brownell's characterization of our criticism seems accurate and just. It is, as he says, an affair of routine "varied by the specific expert decision." There is no use in worrying over the matter, but I have often wondered if the greater literary vigor of French critics was not in part derived from a stronger sense of personal independence in matters of taste. In spite of academies and tradition the Frenchman asserts his personal preferences and defends them. In our current criticism a well-defended personal preference is very hard to find. Impersonality is so much the rule that individual reviewers are not distinguishable. If an American reviewer died unknown, his nearest relatives could not identify him by his articles. Whether our current criticism would greatly improve if critics did not set themselves this standard has been doubted, for it is said, if a man has anything in him he will usually find a way of letting it be seen. Nevertheless, it does seem to restrict too far the limits of a legitimate personal boldness.

It is only one side of the question, I admit, but how can any one be impersonal in his literary taste? He cannot love by proxy or experience a vicarious repulsion. No more can he enjoy a book on the authority of another person. Out of regard for the authority of other people he may become more civilized, and civilized tastes may then emerge, but at no stage of this

¹ *Flaubert*. By Emile Faguet. Houghton Mifflin Co. Boston and New York, 1914.

upward journey is there the slightest moral justification of declaring himself more civilized than he has yet become. We recall to this day the manly observation of Lord Foppington, that the products of his own brain were so pleasing to him that he had no need to read what others had written. We quote to this day the remarks of George I. about "bainting" and "boetry," while the correct and impersonal writers on those subjects in his time have not left a single word behind them.

The effort to be impersonal is in reality an effort to be multi-personal—to think in droves, to substitute for oneself a composite, universally acceptable, book-made, numerical conception. Nature is not so niggardly as book-reviewing implies. Nature is not to blame for that sense of fruitless repetition felt by mortals on beholding forty reviewers in a row. As men they will often reveal quite striking differences. Draw them out on religion, or plumbing, or furnaces, or Theodore Roosevelt, and lines of personal demarcation may be instantly observed. Of course your bumptious, self-raised man with an *egomet* in every sentence is not alluring, but there would not be much left of Sainte-Beuve, or of Carlyle, or even of Matthew Arnold, after the individual was eradicated. Surely there is a decent mean.

Mr. Brownell, in the excellent little volume on *Criticism* from which I have quoted, argues that the French do better because they work under better conditions. With us and in England the business of reviewing attempts to include the art of criticism, whereas in France current books receive at first a mere notice, or *compte rendu*, to inform the reader as to their contents, and are often disposed of once for all in a few back pages of running comment.

The practice of reviewing scrupulously all the output of the novel-factories, exemplified by such periodicals as even the admirable *Athenæum*, would seem singular (to the French public). But with us—even when the literature reviewed is eminent and serious—it is estimated, when it is reviewed with competence, by the anonymous expert, who confines himself to the matter in hand and delivers a kind of bench decision in a circumscribed case. And in France this is left to subsequent books or more general articles, with the result of releasing the critic for more personal work of larger scope. Hence, there are a score of French critics of personal quality for one English or American.

So M. Faguet's work probably seems more remarkable to us than it does to his fellow-countrymen. Flaubert to him exemplifies the only "Law" that he recognizes in the history

of French literature. "I put no faith," he says, "in any of the 'Laws' of literary history except in that which consists in saying that a fashion, succeeding another, fails if it is not the absolute converse of that which preceded it." The French being both imaginative and practical, swing in their literature from one side to the other. The demand for a vivid picture of the truth always follows a riot of the imagination; realism follows romanticism. They weary of their imaginative writers and ask to be "landed in realities," weary of them in turn, and turn again to the works of fancy. Flaubert in the same manner was divided against himself. One side of him loved the mysterious, the gruesome, the dazzling, and the other loved the little concrete facts. When he was young he was alternately imitating Châteaubriand and filling books with notes on his teachers, schoolmates, and the passers-by. A romantic divagation was followed by a bout of realism. After *Madame Bovary* came *Salammbô*, which was followed in turn by *L'Éducation Sentimentale*, and so on in alternate succession, and when he was writing one novel he was always talking about the next one, which was to be its opposite. In his writings he seemed possessed by "two inward tyrants pulling in opposite directions."

In summing up his unhappy self-centered life, M. Faguet steadily avoids any pathological hypothesis and contents himself with old-fashioned moral terms. He was "a shy, lonely, grumpy misanthrope," a compound of timidity and conceit, "one of those men who are always anxious to talk about themselves, though feeling uncomfortable whilst doing it." He despised everything that he did not understand or like, despised the whole literature of the nineteenth century, and was incapable of distinguishing between a mere whim and his reasoned conviction. According to M. Faguet, there probably never was a "more exclusive or uncompromising *ego*." A friend one time ventured a few words of kindly counsel, urging him to publish his first book and take the high place that awaited him in the world of letters. Flaubert wrote back, "You seem to have a mania concerning me, a redhibitory vice," and when the friend complained of this surly reply, Flaubert rejoined:

But then why do you go on with your sing-song? I look upon your mania concerning me as a comical one, that is all. Do I blame you for living in Paris and for publishing your stuff? . . . We are no longer on the same road, we do not sail in the same boat. May God lead each of us where he wants to go. I do not seek a harbor,

but the high seas. If I am shipwrecked you need not trouble to go into mourning.

And he never forgave that well-meaning person whose offense had consisted merely in treating Flaubert like an ordinary man of letters. "What a display of temper!" says M. Faguet; but, after all, he was not an ordinary man of letters, and felt this in his very bones, and, moreover, by M. Faguet's own showing he loathed the ordinary man of letters excessively. Hence it might well be rather irritating to be taken for one; and time, be it noted, has shown that the difference between himself and others which Flaubert had so passionately in mind was not, as a matter of fact, the least bit exaggerated. One might almost say that the "exclusive and uncompromising ego" which M. Faguet condemns was justified by its accomplishments.

In this estimate of Flaubert's personal happiness and social merits, M. Faguet's point of view seems to me a little too contemporaneous and smug. Flaubert's pleasure in writing certain pages might easily have exceeded the joy attained by the most successful persons in all their comfortable lives. Nor ought a man's social value to be reckoned in terms of immediate amiability. For let us suppose that the author of *Madame Bovary* had lived in a hut all his days on turnips, and instead of seeming a curmudgeon to his commonplace contemporaries had gone so far as to cut the throats of half a dozen of them, would we as fellow-men and critics value his services less, for example, than the usual clergyman whom we know, or rate his happiness lower than that of the usual leading citizen? By this I would not imply that murder and a turnip diet do not matter, but merely that in estimating the good and evil in the lives of the men who delight succeeding generations one should not take too immediately practical a view. One must measure the good they do by its duration and quality and the happiness they feel by its occasional intensity. Otherwise we shall be pushed logically into quite unnecessary compassions, lamenting, for example, that Shakespeare was not so happy as a sheep, or Swift so good a fellow as a stock-broker.

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